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Tetro

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Tetro

Abstract

This is a review of *Tetro* (2009).

“Art is a lie that makes us realize truth.”

-Pablo Picasso

Life is filled with conflict. Without conflict, art and religion are redundancies; without truth they are powerless in their roles to resolve conflict. Rivalry is the central conflict to Francis Ford Coppola’s complex and operatic family-drama *Tetro*. The story involves Bennie Tetrocini, on furlough from a job on a cruise (preceded by military school), as he makes his way to Argentina to visit his estranged older brother Angelo and live-in girlfriend Miranda. Angelo left for South America under the pretence of taking a “writing sabbatical.” Entirely spent, Angelo is haunted by his past, slumming in a dead end job with a local theatre group. Not getting any answers to his questions regarding family and Angelo’s exile, Bennie plunders a coded manuscript written by Angelo which details a troubling relationship with his father Carlo, a genius conductor with a brutally competitive streak. With art as a common interest, the brothers attempt to reconcile a secret family history filled with rivalry and tragedy.

Likeness between relatives makes rivalry a likely by-product of their relationships. Many of the turning points of the Bible’s narrative (Cain-Abel, Jacob-Esau) involve a similar rivalry that Carlo establishes for the Tetrocinis. In a flashback, Angelo shares his plans to become a writer with his father; Carlo

responds by warning his son that there is room for only one artistic-genius in the family. When introduced to Angelo's girlfriend, Carlo wastes no time seducing her. The 10th commandment anticipates this sort of conflict by warning against coveting. Coveting something in common with someone else leads to rivalry. In a rivalry, the desires of those in competition have more of an effect on each other than the object does. According to Rene Girard's theory of mimetic desire, the object is interchangeable because it is simply a surrogate to reach what is actually sought – the one in opposition to the other. Coppola embeds rivalries throughout the movie, making it a nearly inescapable pre-condition to every relationship.

Morals and ethics are passed down from one generation to the next through family behavior. Upon meeting Angelo, Bennie constantly informs Angelo how much he has picked up from him – his sense of wanderlust, taste in movies, aspirations for writing – which worries Angelo. Even though Angelo hates Carlo's competitiveness, he nonetheless realizes he has acquired this trait as well. Based on their family history, desires in common will result in Bennie and Angelo perpetuating the Tetrocini cycle of rivalry, with Angelo in Carlo's place. Angelo's self-imposed exile is an attempt to avoid facing the true nature of his role in the family, one that is revealed in the constant mirroring between Carlo and Angelo's behaviors. Angelo relives Carlo's seduction of a former girlfriend when he flirts with a girl intended to be paired with Bennie by singing her a song bearing her

name. The one-time victim transitions into the role of the aggressor, making Angelo by far the most complex character of the movie.

Angelo's art and family-life are completely intertwined. Despite a doting wife and bohemian atmosphere in Argentina, Angelo's reluctance to face his family prevents him from delving back into his work. Because he cannot face either honestly, he does away with them, finding friends and work instead with a local production as a lighting technician. But the play, *Fausta*, tries Angelo's patience so much that his merciless heckling brings the production to a halt. Though the writer is a friend, the play is everything Angelo's work is not— light-hearted and insincere. Angelo's work has a sacred significance and is charged with personal suffering. The contents of his manuscript land him in an asylum literally clutching his "life's work" to his chest. Facing the truth in art is as difficult as in life to Angelo.

According to Girard, the perpetuation of mimetic desire comes from a dishonesty from those involved. Bennie reads Angelo's manuscript and thinks it is exceptional, though it needs an ending (resolution). Angelo responds that there is no ending. If he has no resolution in life, then he won't have one in his work. Girard asserts that by offering truth instead of peace as a means to resolution, Christianity sets itself apart from other religions. Truth and accountability leave no room for denial or accusation. Coppola offers Angelo hope only by facing such truth.

Coppola's own life bears many similarities to Angelo's – Italian-American family of artists with a conductor patriarch – perhaps indicating his hope of finding some insight into his own life by making the movie. By doing so, like Angelo, his art becomes a function of his religion.